

Representative Mike Cooper



1998 Session Report

21st District

January 1998

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

The 1998 Legislative Session began January 12 and is expected to last just 60 days. During that time, I would like to see progress made on issues that are important to the citizens of our state.

We need to address problems that threaten the economic security and well-being of everyday, ordinary working people like you and me. As I see it, the major issues needing work are the declining funding for public schools; solutions for the transportation mess that threatens both our economy and the safety and sanity of everyone who drives our highways; tax relief and economic opportunity for working people; and keeping our electric rates the lowest in the nation.

The test for the Legislature will be how well it stands up for the interests of Washington's working families, and whether lawmakers embrace the notion that good government means seizing the opportunity in good times to strengthen our hope for an even better future.

I look forward to hearing your views on these and other issues as session progresses.

Sincerely,

Mike Cooper
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Transportation System Losing Ground

Transportation is one of the major issues that lawmakers will face in 1998. It *should* have been a major issue during the last session. Instead, a transportation budget was passed that essentially treads water for the next two years. Regardless of how one feels about any of the funding mechanisms being discussed, our legendary traffic congestion, poor road conditions and crumbling bridges are facts that can't be ignored.

Our state has identified more than \$26 billion in transportation needs for the next 20 years, and current law and revenue forecasts will provide barely a third of that amount. But our inability to solve the problem immediately is no excuse for doing nothing. We can't ignore these problems any longer.

What's on the table?

The Governor is proposing to raise an additional \$2.4 billion for critically needed projects over the next five years by increasing the gas tax to pay for additional HOV lanes, grade crossings, freight mobility, bridge repair, local roads and improved safety for "killer" highways. The Mukilteo speedway and HOV lanes from Lynwood to Everett are among the top five projects on this list.

Republicans, who hold a majority in the Legislature, have yet to make a firm proposal. One idea being circulated would transfer Motor Vehicle Excise Tax (license tab) proceeds currently from the General Fund to pay for transportation needs. Just what this would pay for is unclear.

Transportation funding will be a fast-moving and critical issue during session. I urge that you follow this issue in the news and keep me informed of your views.

Our schools are at a crossroads

Our constitution makes support for basic education the "paramount duty" of state government. Washington's \$861 million revenue surplus offers a great opportunity to reverse the decline in state funding for public

schools and ease some of the pressure on local property-tax levies.

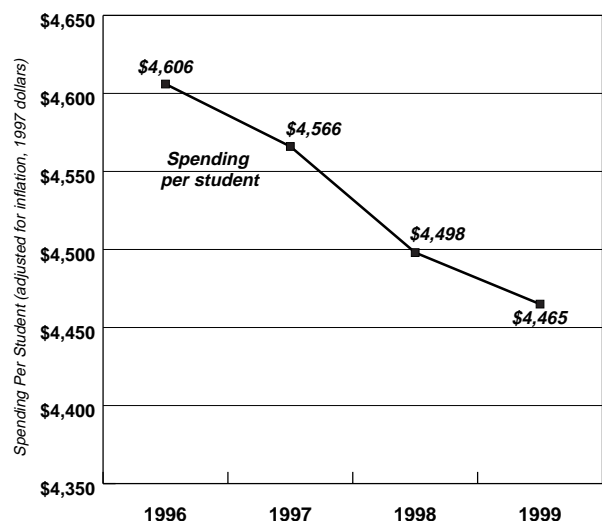
- This year's funding is \$68 *less per student* than last year, when inflation is considered.
- Next year's funding will be \$101 less per student than last year — \$261 less than in 1993!

This is a crucial time for Washington's schools, which are trying to prepare teachers and students for higher academic standards that will be in place by the year 2000.

- Kids who master the "essential learning requirements" reflected in these higher standards have the best chance to get the best jobs and best incomes in the emerging "information economy." Students who fail face a greater risk of failing in life.
- In recent 4th grade tests of 68,000 students, only **14 percent** of the students met the new standards in all four critical skills — reading, writing, math and listening.

We need investments in education that will give kids more "time for excellence," and help teachers take full advantage of new technology for learning. These are investments our children need and deserve.

Funding per public school student drops when adjusted for inflation



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School-to-Work merits support

The 1997 Legislature, without my support, eliminated the very-successful School-to-Work Program and shifted its funding to block grants. The Governor reinstated the grant program because successful school-to-work initiatives are an important part of school reform. They make school relevant by connecting “real world” experiences with subjects students are learning. I will support the additional funding the governor has proposed to expand this program.

- Public involvement — Decisions about deregulation should be made only after significant public input, and not behind closed doors between special interests and lawmakers.
- Conservation — Our successful conservation efforts can’t be shelved in favor of higher profits. When profit is the bottom line, utilities are less likely to participate in low-income weatherization and other programs that result in people using less electricity.

Energy deregulation could burn consumers

We in Washington state enjoy some of the cheapest, cleanest electric power in the country. We’re fortunate to have an abundance of low-cost hydroelectric power, much of it generated by dams along the Columbia River that are operated by the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA). But our electric rates could skyrocket if efforts to deregulate the electric industry succeed.

One purpose of deregulation is to equalize rates around the country. A recent study done by the U.S. Department of Energy says that while deregulation will lower costs for ratepayers in other parts of the country, electric bills in our area could be expected to soar by 30 percent, because we have the lowest rates.

Some interests are saying that deregulation is going to happen at the federal level, and that we should hurry and get ours done first. If they’re right, and deregulation is not an “if” but a “when” issue, there are several assurances needed before anyone should support it. Thus far, no plan, including the so-called “portfolio” model, provide these guarantees:

- Low rates — Consumers should not be stuck paying higher electric bills, while the biggest customers get the best deals.
- Reliability — The reliability of our system must be protected. California has taken a “jump off the cliff” approach to deregulation and is experiencing record numbers of brownouts and blackouts.

Invest the wealth of state surplus to meet needs

Heading into the 1998 Legislative Session, the state operating budget is in good shape. By the end of the current two-year budget cycle, lawmakers expect incoming revenues will exceed spending by \$861 million. Of this amount, \$513 million is a “windfall” — a one-time carry-forward reserve — from the 1995-97 budget cycle. The remaining \$348 million are new revenues that are not being spent.

Various proposals are being made about how best to use this money. Some want to give cash back to taxpayers. Another suggestion is to reduce the license tab fee. These suggestions would provide the average taxpayer with roughly \$35 to \$70 each. Nothing to sneeze at, but not enough to amount to much.

Rather than shaving away the present revenue cushion, you the public, in letters and meetings, time and again have made the case for investing much of the budget surplus into critical local programs, like education, transportation, and job creation. Much like a family invests in home improvement during good times, the state should invest its surplus and plan for the future, you said.

Above all, I don’t want a repeat performance of the last three years. During that time, over \$1 billion in tax breaks were granted by the Legislature, with 80 percent going to special interests. The remainder — just 20 percent — went to average taxpayers. Although I would prefer to invest the surplus in our future, if others insist on giving it away, I want the lion’s share to go to average taxpayers.

Results of the Transportation Survey

Thanks to the many of you who replied to the transportation survey in my last newsletter. Here is a run down of the results:

The current DOT budget provides enough money to complete road construction projects underway, but does not allow new projects to begin. Are you satisfied with this "status quo" approach?

Yes — 21% No — 63% No opinion — 15%

Do you believe that the "performance audit" being done on the Department of Transportation will find enough money to fix our transportation problems?

Yes — 20% No — 57% No opinion — 23%

What do you think is the best solution to our congestion problems? Top three responses:

Light rail/rapid transit — 39%

Raise gas tax — 20%

Slow population growth — 8%



*Thank you for the honor of
serving as your representative.*

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